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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001653

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: INCIDENT PREVENTION MECHANISMS HIT STRIDE

REF: A. TBILISI 1409

- 1B. TBILISI 1312
- 1C. TBILISI 1161
- 1D. TBILISI 1045
- 1E. TBILISI 0808
- 1F. GENEVA 0183

Classified By: DCM Kent D. Logsdon for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment. Recent meetings of Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) for both Abkhazia and South Ossetia have showed progress toward the original concept: a forum enabling regular exchange of information and the pragmatic discussion of incidents and the security environment. For the first time, both IPRMs set dates for follow-on meetings, on September 8 and 3. Both groups agreed to defer thorny topics such as the participation of Abkhaz government-in-exile representatives in the IPRM, and the chairmanship of the South Ossetia IPRM, until the next meeting of the Geneva talks September 17. Both the Abkhaz and South Ossetian de factos made concessions -- tolerance of a government-in-exile representative at the meeting, and an admission that the August 12 shooting originated in South Ossetia -- that struck the Georgians as noteworthy. Some similarities in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian positions, notably on the rather artificial topic of the "definition of incidents," suggest behind-the-scenes coordination by the Russians. The Georgians, while pleased with the meetings, are somewhat suspicious of the sudden turnaround as well -- especially in the light of apparent Russian machinations. Nevertheless, both mechanisms seem to have taken a real step forward. End summary and comment.

AUGUST 11 -- IPRM FOR ABKHAZIA

12. (C) Representatives of the UN, EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), Georgia, Russia, Abkhaz government-in-exile and Abkhaz de facto authorities met in Gali on August 11 for the third meeting of the IPRM for Abkhazia. UN Special Representative Johan Verbeke moderated the meeting; EUMM Head of Mission of Hansjoerg Haber represented the EUMM and later provided most of the following readout for diplomatic colleagues. In a conversation with poloff, Georgian Deputy Reintegration Minister David Rakviashvili characterized the session as constructive in tone, noting in particular the Abkhaz de facto representatives' willingness to tolerate the presence of an Abkhaz government-in-exile representatives.

13. (C) Georgian representatives raised concerns about recent incidents along the administrative boundary, involving in particular limitations on freedom of movement across the boundary. They also protested overflights by Russian helicopters of undisputed Georgian territory and expressed concern about such human rights issues such as conscription and passportization in Gali. The Deputy Commander of the Russian Border Guards in Gali, Colonel Frolov, disputed the overflight allegations, saying that they "couldn't have

happened" because Russian forces keep detailed records of their helicopter routes, and these records showed no such overflights. (Haber noted to diplomatic colleagues that EUMM observers did see Russian helicopters along the boundary, but could not confirm that they crossed it.)

¶4. (C) Abkhaz de facto "foreign ministry" international department head Lana Agrba disputed that any human rights violations had occurred, saying they had received no such complaints. Georgian Deputy Reintegration Minister David Rakviashvili replied that the lack of any formal complaints ORakviashvili replied that the lack of any formal complaints did not indicate a lack of violations. De facto "presidential" representative for the Gali region Ruslan Kishmaria also disputed that any incidents occurred, suggesting that the Georgians did not properly understand the definition of the word "incident" in the sense the Geneva talks intended. He said that the situations referred to by the Georgians, such as attempts to cross the boundary with (what the de factos consider) improper documents, should more properly be considered "crimes" and handled internally, not by the IPRM. Verbeke countered that the definition of "incident" as envisioned in Geneva was flexible, such that a situation considered an incident by any one side would have to be considered one by all sides. Kishmaria also informed the group that the Russian and de facto authorities were continuing the process of tightening control of the boundary even further; in fact, the boundary was formally closed, and every individual crossing was considered an "exception." He said that eventually, however, there would be six official crossing points: the Rukhi bridge plus five others.

¶5. (C) Georgian Interior Ministry Analytical Department

TBILISI 00001653 002 OF 003

Director Shota Utiashvili raised the issue of joint visits, as called for in the original Geneva document establishing the IPRMs; he wanted to make sure all sides were ready to implement them quickly. Kishmaria demurred, saying the sides could figure out the details if and when it became necessary. He added that joint visits were in fact unnecessary, because outside observers were already available on both sides of the boundary: the Russians on the Abkhaz side, and the EUMM on the other side. Verbeke suggested the discussion be deferred for the time being. (Haber described Kishmaria's body language as indicating his lack of belief in the IPRM's utility; to Haber, Kishmaria seemed to consider the meeting a purely political exercise.) Regarding the location of the IPRM meetings themselves, the Abkhaz de factos requested that the meetings remain in Gali until the December "presidential" elections; the Georgians did not object.

¶6. (SBU) The group agreed to hold the next session on September 8 in Gali.

AUGUST 14 -- IPRM FOR SOUTH OSSETIA

¶7. (C) Representatives of the OSCE, EUMM, Georgia, Russia, and South Ossetian de facto authorities met on August 14 in Dvani for the fourth meeting of the IPRM for South Ossetia. Haber moderated the meeting and later provided most of the following readout for diplomatic colleagues. OSCE Conflict Prevention Center Caucasus Representative Emmanuel Anquetil kept quiet during the meeting, not even introducing himself; Anquetil's objective seemed to EUMM political advisor Rosaria Puglisi to be to maintain the precedent of OSCE participation without provoking a confrontation. Puglisi was not even sure if the Russian and South Ossetians knew who he was (although he did arrive in an OSCE vehicle). Indeed, an article on the meeting in the South Ossetian de facto press left the OSCE off its list of participants. Despite their no-show for the July 30 meeting (ref A), Russian representatives did attend on August 14. The South Ossetians attended with no reference to preconditions, although they did raise as concerns the issues they had previously held out as preconditions for further meetings (ref C). Haber described the atmosphere of

the meeting as "relaxed," with numerous informal pull-asides among participants; Haber took these exchanges to be a good sign. He got the sense that some of the sides were in informal contact outside the auspices of the IPRM as well. Rakviashvili agreed that the meeting was constructive.

¶8. (C) The meeting got off to what both Haber and Rakviashvili described as a good start. Georgian representatives raised a concern about an August 12 shooting incident in Dvani; South Ossetian de facto deputy "presidential" representative Merab Chigoev admitted that something had happened and said they were searching for the culprit. This admission took most participants by surprise, and Georgian Reintegration Minister Temuri Yakobashvili later made public statements noting the South Ossetian "confession." In statements published online by the de facto authorities, Chigoev did not admit that the shooting came from the South Ossetian side, but did not exclude the possibility either. In describing his stance at the meeting, he said, "Since no one, first and foremost South Ossetia, is interested in such incidents occurring, we announced that, if interested in such incidents occurring, we announced that, if the shooting in fact originated from the South Ossetian side, then we will take all measures to clarify the circumstances of what happened." It seemed to Haber that Chigoev was playing to two audiences; he was trying to appear constructive at the IPRM, but tough within South Ossetia. Overall, Haber thought Chigoev took a pragmatic approach to the meeting and contributed to its positive atmosphere.

¶9. (C) All sides agreed that the accidental movements of local villagers, such as shepherds, across the administrative boundary should not be treated as hostile acts; there seemed to be some consensus that such individuals should simply be turned back, rather than detained. No formal agreement was reached on this point, however. (Haber later noted that this discussion did not translate into any immediate change in behavior; on August 17, a local villager was reportedly accosted by South Ossetian de facto authorities on the undisputed Georgian side of the boundary, brought across the boundary, and detained.)

¶10. (C) Chigoev raised the issue of missing persons, again requesting information about three individuals who disappeared in October 2008 and adding question about two others. (Previously the South Ossetian de factos had insisted on resolution of the former case as a precondition for their participation in the IPRM.) He said his side was gathering evidence on the cases, which it would provide to

TBILISI 00001653 003 OF 003

the EUMM for its consideration. (Haber later said that the evidence provided is not always useful.) The group agreed to return to these cases in future meetings of the IPRM. Like Kishmaria had in Abkhazia, Chigoev also raised the definition of incidents, suggesting that certain occurrences were not the type of event Geneva intended the IPRMs to cover. Haber took this to be an indication that Russia was behind a coordinated approach to the two IPRMs. (Rakviashvili later agreed, saying the language both Kishmaria and Chigoev used to make this point was almost identical.)

¶11. (C) Colonel Tarasov, Russian commander of South Ossetia, raised a new issue: the return of the remains of Russian military personnel from Georgia to Russia. The Georgians appeared ready to cooperate on this issue. Tarasov also raised the issue of the return of Russian deserters from Georgia, although he said they were not in fact deserters and should not be considered so; he said they should be "handed back to their mothers." Haber observed that the Russian representatives generally avoided active participation in the meeting except on these points.

¶12. (C) Haber noted that the meeting did not make any progress on procedural issues, such as who should be the formal chairman (the South Ossetian de factos' other previous

precondition for participation); the group agreed to defer this discussion to Geneva. Although in the meeting Haber raised a concern about the breakdown in the hotline on July 29-30, no one else seemed interested in discussing the incidents of those days (ref A); Haber wondered if the press had exaggerated the significance of those events.

¶13. (SBU) The group agreed to hold its next session on September 3 in Ergneti.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

¶14. (C) In comments to poloff, Rakviashvili expressed pleasant surprise at the positive and constructive atmosphere of both meetings -- but also could not help but wonder if the change was too good to be true. Pointing to what he considered the obvious Russian orchestration of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian de facto participation, Rakviashvili was suspicious that some larger plan was afoot. He speculated, for example, that the Russians wanted to make the IPRMs into such a successful enterprise that the Geneva talks would no longer be necessary -- and the United States would thereby be cut out of the process. He also wondered if the Russians were mounting a charm offensive to reduce the international community's concerns about -- and therefore attention to -- the situation in Georgia. Poloff noted that anything was possible, but conspiracy theories should not prevent the acknowledgment of genuine progress. Although tempering optimism with caution was fine, and the international community should take care not to allow the IPRMs to replace the political-level discussions in Geneva, it would be appropriate to welcome any real steps toward improving the immediate security and human rights situation on the ground, however modest.

COMMENT: A STEP FORWARD

¶15. (C) The progress made at these two meetings on specific incidents was indeed modest -- but the progress toward two operational mechanisms was considerable. If all sides can continue to meet on a regular basis, to hold substantive and dispassionate discussions, and even to agree when to disagree, the likelihood of events suddenly spiraling out of control will decrease. Haber's observation of informal exchanges inside and likely outside the IPRMs is another sign that the sides are increasing the ways they can stay in touch -- and therefore avoid misunderstandings. These meetings are not an appropriate forum for resolution of the underlying issues, and considering the history of similar fora, Rakviashvili is right to be wary; we should resist any efforts to make them into such a forum. Nevertheless, for the first time since the IPRM idea was agreed in Geneva in February (ref F), they are both working more or less as intended, and that is a significant step forward.

TEFFT